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SUBJECT: MOZAMBIQUE: AGRICULTURE MINISTER FIRED

REF: HOTR WASHINGTON DC R 020901Z MAR 07

¶1. (U) President Guebuza dismissed Agriculture Minister Tomas Mandlate on February 23, replacing him with Erasmo Muhate, a senior ministry official who recently headed the Mozambican Cotton Institute. Mandlate is the first minister to be fired by President Guebuza, fulfilling a pledge Guebuza made shortly after assuming office in February 2005 that ministers who did not perform would be replaced. Dismissing a serving minister is a rarity for Mozambique -- Guebuza's predecessor Chissano preferred to let failing ministers finish their five-year terms and then not re-appoint them.

¶2. (U) The GRM has given no reason for Mandlate's dismissal. However it is widely believed that Mandlate, a former primary school teacher, was not up to the job of running a difficult ministry in the forefront of President Guebuza's "fight against absolute poverty." (Note: He is rumored to have been given a new job in the Ministry of Education. End note.) Mandlate's successor, on the contrary, is an Agriculture Ministry insider and trained as an agronomist.

¶3. (SBU) Even before Mandlate's dismissal, the press speculated that a government shuffle was coming. Over the past week other names have been mentioned of ministers likely to be removed or transferred, including the Interior Minister (see ref) and the nearly invisible Minister for Women and Social Action.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Guebuza has focussed on improving life for the 80% of Mozambicans who live in rural areas; given his weak performance, Mandlate was an obvious target for removal.

Also, Guebuza emerged stronger from the 9th Frelimo Congress last November and, doubtless, feels more confident with his cabinet in exerting his wishes. Further dismissals are certainly possible.

Johnson